

During the Six Dynasties (220 – 589) there evolved a distinct poetic current of “roaming into immortality” (youxian shi), which is distinguished as a sub-genre of lyrical poetry shi in the 6th century anthology *Wenxuan*. The youxian shi concern higher realms of nature, inhabited by divine immortal beings, replete with paradisiacal marvels and ecstatic cosmic flights. Although poetry on immortality was written by the leading poets of the age, it remains even today much neglected in the literary history of the Six Dynasties, having been consciously marginalised by generations of later critics and commentators. And yet, considerations of this “otherworldly” poetic current not only reveal the other, more imaginative and mystic side of Chinese poetic vision, but also allow us to make significant additions to and re-evaluate traditional notions of poetic developments and the meaning of poetry in early medieval China.

A major problem in the study of the poems on “roaming into immortality” is the narrow definition of genres on the basis of concrete verse form, whereby the connections between the various forms are largely neglected. This approach, deeply rooted in traditional Chinese literary history, does not allow us to perceive the concrete literary works in the wider context of poetry, or even of literature as such. In the present study I attempt to go beyond the narrowly defined youxian shi genre limited to shi lyric poetry written mostly in pentasyllabic verse, and to consider a broad range of literature which treats the theme of immortality, although bearing different titles and traditionally anthologised under different genre categories. Thus, although the central focus of the study is on lyric poetry shi, it is discussed within the context of other contemporary genres such as rhapsody fu, eulogia song and encomia zan.